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ABSTRACT

Role reversal between parent and child was investigated in an attempt to assess responses of two samples (mothers and students) to children depicted in two hypothetical behavioral settings: a non-threatening and a danger setting. Married versus single status of the samples also was analyzed. The Adult Responses to Children's Behavior (ARCB) scale was developed and used to expose adults to hypothetical behavior situations of young children using an audio-visual method of presentation. For example, a slide was presented with accompanying narrative showing a child in a certain situation and subjects were asked how they would respond to the child in the setting. Child-oriented, adult-oriented and task-oriented response choices were provided with each depicted setting. Mothers' and students' responses to the child in the non-danger situation were mainly child-oriented. For both samples, the response to the danger setting was considerably less child-oriented. Responses became more adult- and task-oriented when the danger situation was presented. Single mothers and students were more task-oriented in the danger setting than were married mothers. Findings are interpreted as demonstrating that behavioral cues from children do affect an adult's style of response. (Author/RH)

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BEHAVIORAL CUES FROM CHILDREN: ANALYSIS OF ADULT RESPONSES TO CHILDHOOD DANGER vs. NON-DANGER SITUATIONS[1]

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ABSTRACT

A common problem facing individuals is caregiver competency, i. e. responding to and insuring children's well-being. Traditional socialization theory assumes that information (including that regarding health and safety topics) flows from parent to child. Current research takes the opposite approach, i.e. children's behavioral cues influence adult responses to them. This study tests an "experience" hypothesis by analyzing responses of a mother and a student sample to children depicted in a non-threatening and a danger setting. Significant differences in type of response of adults to children were found for both settings. Findings are interpreted via the "experience" hypothesis in caregiving.

A common problem facing both parents and nonparents involved in childcare is the question of caregiver competency, i.e. responding to and ensuring children's well-being. This is especially true today considering the increasing proportion of working mothers and the increased demand for professional child care services.

A fundamental thrust of research in traditional family theory features the parent as a primary agent of socialization while the child is the object of the parent's socialization efforts. This approach views parents as transmitting positive cultural traits to children including such topics as health and safety concerns. The basic child role is that of learner of this cultural information. This approach has been labeled by Richard Bell (1968) as a unidirectional model of socialization --- the information flow is from parent to child.

In recent years, several researchers and theorists (Bell, 1968; Bell and Harper, 1977; Harper, 1971) have suggested reversing this assumption. They focus attention on the traditional model's omission of the possible influences of a child on shaping adult behavior, i.e. the flow of information is from child to parent. As a result, there is a growing body of empirical literature demonstrating that adults use children's behavioral cues to provide caregiving experiences (Bell and Harper, 1977; Parke and O'Leary, 1976; Osofsky, 1971; Osofsky and O'Connell, 1972). The basic premise of these investigations is that the fundamental parent-child roles are reversible and reciprocal by nature in that both participants are influenced and affected by the other in social interaction (Bigner, 1979).

The problem in this paper is a specific study of role reversal

between parent and child. As noted above, the question of experience in the caregiver role is crucial in interpreting children's behavioral cues. Specifically, the analysis described below presents a comparison of two selected samples (81 mothers and 390 college students) who have responded to the behavior of children in two hypothetical behavioral settings: (a) those in which the child's well-being is threatened (danger situations); and (b) those in which the child's well-being is not threatened (non-danger situation). We assume that an adult's past experiences with children in caregiving situations will be reflected in differing responses to these situations, and it is for this reason that we strategically selected samples that contrast on this point.

Method

Two Selected Samples

As far as we are able to determine, there is only a single study in the literature comparing both a parent and a collegiate sample regarding differences in response to child situations (Marwell and Schmitt, 1969). These researchers studied a sample of 426 unmarried college females and a sample of 136 mothers in responses to children (from two to nine years of age) in a hypothetical situation where the education of the child was poor and needed improvement. Mothers were found to be more likely to suggest use of friendly means such as pointing out good qualities of the child (child-oriented response) and that adults would have a high opinion of the child if s/he improved in learning (adult-oriented responses). Thus, Marwell and Schmitt verify

a kind of "experience" hypothesis, i.e. that more intimate knowledge of a child's world tends to lead to child-oriented adult responses.

Our study follows this design but extends it somewhat by analyzing marital status of respondents. Both our mother and student samples overlap in that a fraction of students were married. Hence, married versus single status is analyzed. This is done in addition to comparing mothers versus students, and we take marital status as a rough index of adult experience with children.

The Suburban Mothers. Data were collected from N=81 mothers from four suburban areas in the moutain west for a study of parental responses to child attitudes in selected behavioral situations.[1] The sample was broken down as follows: 49 mothers were married, and 32 were either single, divorced, separated, or widowed (these cases were collapsed into a "single" category). Their ages ranged from 21 to 52 years with the mean age being 34 years.

We view marital status as an important factor in response to children's behavioral cues. We assume that married mothers have continuing and constant interaction with their children while, at least to some extent, non-married mothers may rely on child care specialists to a greater extent for assistance in the parenting role. For mothers, then, marital status is a rough measure of actual contact with children and the potential of relative constancy in responding to a child's requests.

The Collegiate Sample. Data were collected also from a sample of N=390 college students attending a large land-grant university in the mountain west. The size of this cample was necessary in order to obtain

an adewuate fraction of married students to allow comparison with the suburban mothers. There were N=24 married students from the total, a just-statistically-adequate subsample size. The reader will agree that status of "college student" usually implies little direct experience with children, hence providing a good comparison against the mother sample. Finally, comparing married versus single status completes the analysis.

We wish to reiterate that the purpose here is to assess how adults respond to children, and we make no direct comparison of our two disparate samples as they derive from completely different populations.

Adult Responses to Children's Behavior Scale. As part of an ongoing regional agricultural experiment station research project on the topic of development of social competencies in children, a scale was developed to test directly how adults are affected by selected childhood situations. We refer to this scale as Adult Responses to Children's Behavior (ARC-B). Our procedure was to expose adults to hypothetical behavior situations of young children using an audio-visual method of presentation.

The ARC-B is administered to a sample of adults by a series of audio-visual items portraying a young child in a situation calling for some adult response. For example, a slide is presented with accompanying narrative showing a child in a certain situation, and sample persons are asked how they would respond to the child in this setting. Three primary response choice orientations are given which include: (1) "Adult," which is characterized by assertion of adult power or control over the

child; (2) "Child," which is characterized by concern for the child's welfare and development; and (3) "Task," which emphasizes immediate problem resolution, more or less independent of effect on either child or adult.

This instrument was developed and modified using some ten separate samples of persons (both parents and nonparents). The three response categories (Adult, Child, Task) were derived from factor analyses of initial sample data, and subsequent tests using other sample persons have validated the scale. The mean intercorrelation coefficient between all samples was .50, indicating a generally valid instrument.

Children in Danger versus Non-Danger Settings. It would seem that a crucial test of how an adult is influenced by a child's behavior is found by comparing danger and non-danger child behavior settings. We assume that most adults will respond quite differently if they perceive a child to be in imminent physical danger. For this comparative test, two items (slides) were selected from the ARC-B instrument. The first presented a child in a danger situation while the second presented a non-danger setting.

The danger setting is simulated by a four-year-old boy climbing up a chest of drawers using the pulled out drawers as a ladder. The response choices for adults are: (a) Show him how the chest could fall and hurt him (Child-oriented); (b) Take him down; send him outside to play (Task-oriented); or (c) Tell him to get down immediately or he will get a spanking (Adult-oriented).

The non-danger setting is as follows: Shortly after preparing Mary's bath and telling her to get in the tub, you find her in the

living room waiting for her favorite TV program. The choices for adult responses are: (a) "All right, go ahead and watch TV." (Task-oriented); (b) Put her to bed (Adult-oriented); and (c) Tell her if she hurries, she will not miss the show; then help her to hurry (Child-oriented).

Findings

Response to Child in a Non-Danger Setting

Table 1 compares the mother with the student sample as they responded to the child in a non-danger behavior setting. Note that despite the diversity of the samples that "Child" orientation is the predominant adult response. Note also that for both samples, the chi-square statistic is not statistically significant. This means that regardless of marital status or the fact that we analyze mothers versus students, all respondents view the child in essentially the same manner. For example, note in Table 1 that both married and single mothers gave similar responses to the child in the non-danger setting. An overwhelming majority (97 per cent single mothers and 94 per cent married mothers) were "Child" oriented in response. Of the married mothers, only four per cent chose the "Adult" and two per cent chose the "Task" response. No single mothers responded to the "Adult" choice, while only three per cent chose the "Task" response.

The students (right side of Table 1) closely resembled the mother sample in response style. All (100 per cent) of the married students were "Child" oriented as was 96 per cent of the single students. Only three per cent of the single students chose the "adult" response, and one per cent were "Task" oriented.

Insert Table 1 about here

Response to Child in a Danger Setting

For both samples, the response to the danger setting is considerably different. While no significant results occur for responses to the non-danger setting, results reported in Table 2 are highly significant. The chi-square test for the mother sample and the student sample reflect these differences in response.

For the non-danger setting (Table 1), the predominant adult response is "Child" oriented. However, response become more "Adult" and "Task" oriented when the danger situation is presented. For example, 57 per cent of the married and 67 per cent of the single mothers gave the "Child" response. No single mothers and 14 per cent of the married mothers chose the "Adult" response while 29 per cent of the married mothers and 33 per cent of the single mothers were "Task" oriented in this situation. The reader should compare the percentages of responses for the "Task" category in Table 1 with those in Table 2. It is here that the respondents shift toward "Task" and "Adult" orientation. This shift in adult response style is also seen for the student sample. In examining the student portion of Table 2, note that 71 per cent of both married and single students were "Child" oriented, 17 per cent of the married students, and 6 per cent of the single students chose the "Adult" response. The "Task" response was given by 13 per cent of the married students and by 23 per cent of the single students. The reader should note again the similarity of the mother and student samples in their response to a child in a danger situation. More striking, however, is the difference in response to the danger and non-danger situations.

(9)

Insert Table 2 about here

Discussion

The analyses clearly reveal that role reversals do occur in family interactions, i.e. children indeed modify and determine adult's behavior toward them. This is seen most readily in the comparison of data from Table 1 to Table 2 where apparently two factors are operating. First, and most likely important, is the actual behavioral setting of the child. Implicit danger evokes a different type of adult response with both "Adult" and "Task" orientation emerging. This finding supports the early research of Marwell and Schmitt (1969) who found essentially the same pattern. We interpret this finding in the following manner: adults are concerned about the child's development and learning when a situation contains no threatening elements to a child's welfare. However, adults shift to "Task" or instrumental orientations whenever a threatening situation occurs. This demonstrates without doubt that behavioral cues from children do affect an adult's style of response.

This finding we suggest is quite a general response. Note in Table 2 that it doesn't matter whether the adult is a parent or a student; all respond in a similar manner. However, marital status does make a difference in the danger situation. Ironically, it is both the single mother and the student who are more "Task" oriented, i.e. who tend more to state they wish to solve quickly the threatening event.

Note further that despite the general "Task" orientation of adults in child-threatening situations, it is the mothers who are relatively more concerned for the child's well-being. Note in Table 2 that the

"Task" response for mothers is nearly twice that of students. We interpret this finding according to the previously mentioned "experience" hypothesis: The more experience the caregiver has with children, the more sensitive s/he is to potential threatening child-related events. While this result may appear to be common sense, it actually is quite important in suggesting the efficacy of training caregivers through experience as well as through traditional classroom techniques. It tells us that day care providers should be sensitized directly to children in actual behavioral settings. Mothers assimilate this information and knowledge by virtue of the experience of raising children. Clearly, direct caregiving experiences are desirable for both parents and others who work directly with children.

Finally, it is recognized that the findings of this study are tentative and that they are based on two disparate samples where we have described the effect of marital status and differing behavioral settings for children. What is needed is a systematic analysis of major family variables and how they affect adult responses to children. For example, age, sex, occupation, education, income, family size, and so on should be investigated in this context. We are suggesting the development of a "role-reversal" socialization theory which is as detailed as the traditional explanation. This theory should be based on empirical investigations. Such analyses will eventually build up a more comprehensive picture of the child-adult interaction sequence where the interest is in how children influence adults' behavior.

FOOTNOTES

1. These data were taken from a Masters thesis completed by Bonnie Mucklow in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Colorado State University. The thesis topic dealt directly with the question of adult responses to child situations and was ideally suited for our secondary analysis.

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TABLE 1. COMPARISON OF MOTHER vs. STUDENT SAMPLE RESPONSE TO NON-DANGER SETTING

	MOTHERS (N=81)				STUDENTS (N=390)			
Marital Status	(Percentages) Adult	Child	Task	Row N's	(Percentages) Adult	Child	Task	Row N's
Married	4	94	2	(49)	0	100	0	(24)
Single	0	97	3	(30)	3	96	1	(366)
	χ^2 = 1.4.657	2 d.f.	P= <.4925		χ^2 = .88185	2 d.f.	P= <.6434	

TABLE 2. COMPARISON OF MOTHER vs. STUDENT SAMPLE RESPONSE TO DANGER SETTING

	MOTHERS (N=81)				STUDENTS (N=390)			
Marital Status	(Percentages) Adult	Child	Task	Row N's	(Percentages) Adult	Child	Task	Row N's
Married	14	57	29	(49)	17	71	13	(24)
Single	0	67	33	(30)	6	71	23	(366)
	χ^2 = 4.70238	2 d.f.	P= <.0953		χ^2 = 5.33172	2 d.f.	P= <.0695	